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ABSTRACT

While the development of children's self-esteem is a worthwhile goal in early education, many practices designed to reach this goal may instead be encouraging narcissism. Such practices include those that direct children's attention to their own inner gratifications, or encourage children to believe their specialness is dependent on trivial skills. In order to motivate children by "starting where they are," teachers can provide children with topics that encourage curiosity about others and themselves, and reduce emphasis on consumer activities. Researchers have suggested that self-esteem is enhanced in children when their parents and teachers provide an optimum mixture of acceptance, affection, limits, and expectations; and have pointed out that construals of the self vary between Western cultures, which see the self as an independent entity, and Asian and African cultures, which see the self as interdependent within the social context. Self-esteem is most likely to be fostered when children are esteemed and receive meaningful feedback in the form of appreciation rather than empty praise and flattery. Healthy self-esteem is more likely to be developed when children are engaged in activities for which they can make real decisions and contributions than in frivolous activities. Teachers can capitalize on children's in-born disposition to learn by engaging children in project work, which provides them with opportunity for discussion, initiative, and cooperation. Children's self-esteem can also be strengthened when they have the opportunity to develop and apply criteria for evaluating their own work. Such practices are more likely than trivial practices which engender self-preoccupation to build in children a sense of self-worth that can provide a foundation for their future lives. (BC)

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Self-Esteem and Narcissism: Implications for Practice

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Helping children to "feel good about themselves" is frequently listed as an important goal of early education. For example, the National Association of Elementary School Principals (1990) listed the development of "a positive self-image" first among the characteristics of a good quality early childhood program. One newsletter for teachers quotes a statement that "the basis for *everything* we do is self-esteem. Therefore, if we can do something to give children a stronger sense of themselves, starting in preschool, they'll be [a lot wiser] in the choices they make" (McDaniel, 1986).

Early Childhood Practices: Narcissism versus Self Esteem

While the development of high self-esteem seems a worthwhile goal, many practices designed to reach it may instead be encouraging narcissism. This confusion is exemplified by a practice observed in a first grade classroom. Each child had produced a booklet titled "All About Me," consisting of dittoed pages prepared by the teacher, on which the child had provided information. The first page asked for a list of basic information about the child's home and family. The second page was titled "What I like to eat," the third "What I like to watch on TV," the next "What I want for a present," and so forth. On each page the child's attention was directed toward his or her own inner gratification. The topic of each page in these booklets put the child in the role of consumer. No page was included that put the child in the role of producer, explorer, or problem solver.

Another common example of practices intended to enhance self-esteem but unlikely to do so was a display of kindergartners' work consisting of nine paper doll-like figures, each with a balloon containing a sentence stem beginning "I am special because..." The sentences depicted in the display read "I am special because I can color," "...I can ride a bike," and so forth. Although these skills are valuable, is there not some risk in encouraging children to believe that their specialness is dependent on these comparatively trivial things, rather than on more enduring dispositions such as persistence in the face of difficulty and readiness to help their classmates?

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Teachers often employ practices intended to motivate children by beginning "where they are." However, the same intentions could be satisfied in other ways. Starting "where children are" can be accomplished by providing topics that would encourage curiosity about others *and* themselves, reduce emphasis on consumerism, and at the same time strengthen the intellectual ethos of the classroom.

Such a project was observed in a rural British infant school. A large display on the bulletin board was titled "We Are a Class Full of Bodies." Just below the title was the heading "Here Are the Details." The display space was taken up with bar graphs of the children's weights and heights, eye colors, shoe sizes, and so forth. As the children worked in small groups collecting information brought from home, taking measurements, and preparing graphs together, the teacher was able to create an ethos of a community of researchers. This project began "where the children were" by collecting, pooling, analyzing, and displaying data derived from all the children in the class.

Self-Esteem: Developmental and Cross-Cultural Considerations

In an examination of developmental considerations, Bednar, Wells, and Peterson (1989) suggest that feelings of competence and the self-esteem associated with them are enhanced in children when their parents provide an optimum mixture of acceptance, affection, limits, and expectations. In a similar way, teachers are likely to engender positive feelings when they provide such a combination of acceptance, limits, and expectations concerning behavior and effort (Lamborn et al., 1991).

Markus and Kitayama (1991) point out that the concept of the self varies among cultures, and that Westerners typically construe themselves as *independent*, stable entities. On the other hand, they assert that in Asia and Africa the self is viewed as *interdependent* and connected with the social context. Westerners view the self as an autonomous entity consisting of a unique configuration of traits. The Asian view is that the self exists primarily in relation to specific social contexts, and is esteemed to the extent that it can adjust to others and maintain harmony.

Appropriate Practices

The trend toward excessive emphasis on self-esteem and self-congratulation described above may be due to a general desire to correct earlier traditions of avoiding complimenting children for fear of making them conceited. However, the current practices described above may be overcorrections of such traditions.

Self-esteem is most likely to be fostered when children are esteemed and treated respectfully and receive the right kind of positive, meaningful feedback in the form of appreciation, rather than empty praise and flattery. Appreciation is positive feedback related explicitly and directly to the *content* of the child's interest and effort. A teacher might, for example, bring a new reference book to class in response to a question raised by a child. In this way, the teacher provides positive feedback without taking the children's minds off the subject. Self-esteem can be based on increased understanding and competence, as well as on contributing to the work of the group.

Healthy self-esteem is more likely to be developed when children are engaged in activities for which they can make real decisions and contributions than in activities that are frivolous and cute. Early childhood educators have traditionally emphasized the fact that play is children's natural way of learning (Isenberg & Quisenberry, 1988). Besides play, however, it is just as natural for young children to learn through investigation. Young children are born scientists. They devote enormous amounts of time and energy to investigating the environments in which they are raised.

Teachers can capitalize on these in-born dispositions by engaging children in investigations through project work, investigations that are in-depth studies of real topics, environments, events, and objects worthy of children's attention and understanding (Katz & Chard, 1989). In the course of such undertakings, children negotiate with their teachers to determine the questions to be answered, the studies to be undertaken, and ways of representing their findings in media such as painting, drawing, and dramatic play. Project work provides children with opportunity for discussion, decision making, cooperation, initiative, negotiation, compromise, and evaluation of the outcomes of their own efforts. In this way, children's self-esteem can be based on their contribution to the work of the group.

Children's self-esteem can also be strengthened when they have the opportunity to develop and apply criteria for evaluating their own work. For example, instead of taking work home daily, they can be encouraged to collect it for a week or more, after which the teacher can discuss possible criteria for selecting an item they wish to take home. The emphasis should not be on whether they like a piece of work, but on whether the piece includes all they want it to, or whether it is as clear or informative as they want it to be. Similarly, when children are engaged in project work with others, they can evaluate the extent to which they have answered the questions they began with, and assess the work accomplished on criteria developed with their teacher concerning the accuracy, completeness, and interest value of their final products (Katz & Chard, 1989).

Conclusion

Practices which engage children's minds in investigating aspects of their own experiences and environments can help them develop realistic criteria of self-esteem. Such practices are more likely than trivial practices which engender self-preoccupation to build in children a deep sense of competence and self-worth that can provide a firm foundation for their future.

Editor's Note: This Digest is excerpted from the paper *Distinctions between Self-Esteem and Narcissism: Implications for Practice* (available from ERIC/EECE; approximately 80 pages; $10.00).

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